

Finding and Defining “Home”

Asma and Taylor

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The word “home” appears one hundred and eighteen times in the nine sections of Asma’s story that we shared with you. It takes many forms—Asma uses it to describe the little one-room apartment in Detroit she stayed in for just a few days before transferring down to Kentucky, but it is also Somalia, the apartment she stayed in with friends in Syria, the houses she’s shared with friends in Kentucky and Ohio, her current house... The list continues.

But Asma asked to add a conclusion, and in that conclusion, she reiterated that her *true* home is the one she lives in now. Her mother, an abstract sort of home, is one she wishes to combine with this one:

A: My home is here. Yeah.

T: Here?

A: My home in—Yeah, is here, the only home I have ever spent...A secure and safe, is here. I am not thinking to travel any otherwhere.

T: Yeah?

A: This is my home, and...

T: This will be your home, too? In the future?

A: Yeah. Will be home, too, in the future.

T: What about—would you still call your mom “home,” though?

A: Um, every time I, I, you—I hear “home?”

T: [murmurs] You think of your mom?

A: My mom is coming to me, the picture I have it.

T: Your mom? And your home now?

A: My home now.

T: Okay.

A: My home now. And I’m trying to compare...

T: Combine? Combine them?

A: Combine. Combine—this is not compare, the compare is... [laughs]

T: Hey, you are learning the language, you are getting the lingo down. [A laughs] You’re getting there. [laughs, clears throat].

A: Combine them, one home, it will be in, in United State.

T: Combine them.

A: Yeah.

T: And you want it here. [writing]

A: Yeah, I want it here, yeah.

“Home,” then, is so much more to Asma than a place or a feeling. It is a combination of these things, a continually changing, multi-faceted concept that she defines and redefines throughout her life and her life’s story. It is also a term that has various iterations in research on refugees, gender dynamics, and family relationships, as well. Connor and colleagues talk about how

Paradoxically, women have more power in many ways, but also have greater needs due to increased demands on their time. In a sense, they have lost some power they had within the home because of the need for increased help. (2016: 15)

Here, “the home” becomes a location of empowerment and disempowerment, opportunity and tension, centered around a woman’s roles and duties in the household and family setting. Boyle and Ali make a similar point, but a few pages later, they also talk about “migrants’ continuing ties to the home society,” thereby creating another layer of “home” in the dialogue about refugees and migrants (2010: 50).

This other “home”—the country, culture, community, and economy Asma left behind—acts as yet another source of that empowerment and disempowerment, opportunity and tension. She finds strength and support in connecting with her family in Somalia and making new connections with Somalians in the United States, but she also alternates between hope and fear, pride and shame, about the state of her home country and its unclear future.

The following selection from one of our conversations speaks to Asma’s complicated relationship with home, as she explains Sharia law and why she does not follow Somalian news:

A: They start bringing something they call Islamic rule.

T: Yeah, shar-Sharia?

A: Sharia law? Sharia law? And that Sharia law mess our country.

T: Yeah. Yeah.

A: I mean you can’t judge anyone—you can be Sharia law in, by yourself, you can follow everything correctly by yourself.

T: Mhm.

A: But don’t judge the other people.

T: Yeah.

A: I know, my country has 99 percent in, in Muslim, but you cannot say, “We are Muslim...”

T: Yeah.

A: "So we have to whole county to, to follow the Muslim. Islamic, Sharia law." And then, what they used to do is something very bad. And then my friend who used to live with me, she told me, "Did you see the news? What they did that man? What they did?" Just like... I mean, my mom told me, "Don't watch the news," but I need to know what is, what's going on with Sharia law.

T: Yeah.

A: And I find a man...I find a video.

T: Mhm.

A: If you google it, maybe you can see it. I find a man, they dig in the floor, and they put in this half [gesturing lower body up to chest], and they just left his head.

T: Mhm.

A: And he's, he's, he's alive. He's talking.

T: Mhm.

A: They tell him he raped a girl.

T: Oh, okay.

A: He raped the girl. So the reason he raped the girl...it was just, what...Sharia law doesn't tell us rape, sex before marriage...?

T: Okay, so they might have just had sex before marriage, but they called it rape. Okay.

A: Yeah. They say he had sex with the girl. He didn't rape her, she was happy.

T: Yeah.

A: He did the sex with the girl, so we need to do—we need to follow what say the Sharia law. What the Sharia law say.

T: Mhm.

A: And then they say—the Sharia law say—I read, I read that thing, and it's true for the Sharia law.

T: Yeah.

A: But, what about the human peoples? You can do something like that, I mean. You're not the judge. God is the judge. And God...He always...forgive his people.

T: Mhm.

A: You can't be a judge. So what they did is, they dig the floor, and they put that man in-inside, and they left his head, and they, they throwing the rock, you know the rock?

T: They stoned him?

A: A lot of rocks. Big rocks. A lot of big one.

T: And they killed him?

A: They killed him that way. He, he—I watched until he die. He’s talking, he’s talking, they say, “Please, don’t do this to me. I-I will ask God for, to forgive me.” And they, they carry the big rocks and they put it [??] his head until his head is just flat.

T: Wow.

A: After that day... I didn’t sleep that night.

T: Mhm.

A: I was throwing up in bathroom.

T: Yeah.

A: After that day, I promise not to watch anything awful what is happening in my country.

T: Yeah.

A: Anything...bad...happening in my country, I promise, I promised myself, I don’t watch.

T: Yeah.

A: Yeah, until now I don’t watch. But my husband, is following.

T: So you don’t follow any, you don’t follow the news?

A: No. No more. Anything is happening maybe, I see some pictures in the Facebook, I ignore it.

In a way, then, Asma’s images of Somalia, her “home” that is no longer and never really was “home” to her, is split between idealized, happy memories of a past Somalia and the harsh violence of the country’s current turmoil.

Christina Zarowsky writes of the Somali word:

Hummad—which is roughly equivalent to a combination of the English terms passion, desire, and yearning, and literally means ‘fever’—is evoked and brings to my respondents’ minds particular details; the oranges of Hurso, green leaves after rain, the loading of camels. (2004: 195)

The multi-faceted definition of the term speaks to Asma’s own ruminations on Somalia. There is yearning here, in her dream for her children to experience nature the way she did, but there is also passion and desire, in her frustration with the violent “mess” that is plaguing her home country. This ‘fever’ is so profound that seeing those videos and news stories literally makes her ill, and I believe that *hummad*, then, speaks to the intense emotions she feels about her home.

It comes, too, in that final iteration of “home,” as she dreams of bringing her mother, the other central image that comes to mind when she imagines home, to the United States. It consumes her

waking hours, this yearning for her mother, and so that *hummad* develops yet another layer in Asma's notions of what it means to make a place for one's family "home."